

Barack Obama COP26 Climate Speech Transcript 8-11-2021

Thank you so much. Thank you. Hello, Glasgow.

Thank you very much. Thank you. Please. Well, it is wonderful to be back in the UK. It is, let's face it, wonderful to be traveling anywhere these days. Thank you, Sheila, for that outstanding introduction and for all the work that you are doing in a part of the world that is feeling the effects of climate change right now. Thank you for making what sometimes can seem a bunch of abstract numbers painfully immediately real so we're very grateful for her.

I am a private citizen now so trips like this feel a little bit different than they used to. I don't get invited to the big group photo. Traffic is a thing again. Music doesn't play when I walk into the room. On the positive side, I can give a speech like this without wearing a tie and not create a scandal back home. I hope. But even though I'm not required to attend summits like this anymore, old habits die hard. And when the issue at hand is the health of our planet and the world our children and our grandchildren will inherit, then you will have a hard time keeping me away. That's why I'm here today to talk about what's happened in the six years since I spoke to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris and to talk about the steps we need to take if we want to keep doing big things. Because when it comes to climate, time really is running out.

You heard the same message from world leaders last week, and now that they've left, here's what we can report. Meaningful progress has been made since Paris. And the agreements made here in Glasgow, thanks to so many of you, including my friend John Kerry here, who is tireless and his team. Thanks to your efforts here in Glasgow, we see the promise of further progress.

What is also true is that collectively and individually we are still falling short. We have not done nearly enough to address this crisis. We are going to have to do more. Whether that happens or not to a large degree is going to depend on you. Not just those of you in this room, but anybody who's watching or reading a transcript of what I say here today. That was true six years ago as well.

And on Paris, our goal was to turn progress into an enduring framework that would give the world confidence in a low carbon future, an agreement where countries would update their emissions targets on a regular basis, an agreement that would help developing nations get the resources they need to skip the dirty

phase of development and help those nations that are most vulnerable to climate change get the resources they need to adapt, an agreement that would give businesses and investors the certainty that the global economy is on firm path towards a clean and sustainable future.

In other words, our hope was to create an agreement they gave our planet a fighting chance. That was our ambition. By some measures, the agreement has been a success. For the first time leaders of nearly 200 nations, large and small, developed and developing, made a commitment to work together to confront a threat to the people of all nations. That seemed proof that for all the divisions in our world when a crisis threatens all of us, we can come together to address it.

At the time, we also believed that if enough national governments showed they were serious about climate, then other institutions, particularly in the private sector, would start raising their sights as well. Over the last six years, that is what's happened. Today more than one-fifth of the world's largest companies have set net zero emissions targets. Not just because it's the right thing to do for the environment, but in many cases because it makes sense for their bottom line. More than 700 cities in more than 50 countries have pledged to cut their emissions in half by the end of the decade and reach net zero by 2050. About a third of the global banking sector has agreed to align their work with the Paris Agreement.

That's meaningful. Now, back in the United States of course, some of our progress stalled when my successor decided to unilaterally pull out of the Paris Agreement in his first year in office. I wasn't real happy about that. And yet the determination of our state and local governments, along with the regulations and investment that my administration had already put in place, allowed our country to keep moving forward despite hostility from the White House. The \$90 billion investment that we made in 2009 helped to jumpstart the clean energy industry in the United States and markets adapted and so did consumers. Even when the Trump administration rolled back emission requirements for automakers, along with regulatory changes and efficiency standards, many businesses chose to stay the course. They kept reducing emissions. They continued the transition to electric vehicles and energy-saving appliances. The ball had been rolling and it didn't stop.

Meanwhile, science and technology continue to advance. Today the price of solar and wind energy has dropped to the point where in some places clean energy is cheaper than fossil fuels. Around the world, scientists and entrepreneurs are integrating abundant renewable energy, more powerful batteries, breakthroughs in fields like synthetic biology to invent a better future that is healthier and more affordable. That's all good news for the planet and it is also good news for people looking for a job.

In the US alone, more than 3 million people now work in clean energy related jobs. That is more than the number of people currently employed by the entire fossil fuel industry. Despite four years of active hostility toward climate science coming from the very top of our federal government, the American people managed to still meet our original commitment under the Paris Agreement. Not only that, but the rest of the world stayed in the deal. Now with President Biden and his administration re-joining the agreement, the US government is once again engaged and prepared to take a leadership role. Everybody who's been watching John Kerry run around here knows that we take that role seriously.

As the world's second largest emitter of greenhouse gases, the US has to lead. We have enormous responsibilities and obviously we still have a lot of work to do. But last week, Congress passed President Biden's bipartisan infrastructure bill that will, among other things, create jobs manufacturing solar panels and wind turbines and batteries and electric vehicles and build out the first ever national network of charging stations so families can travel across the US in electric vehicles. I'm confident that a version of President Biden's Build Back Better bill will pass through Congress in the coming next few weeks. Here's what it will mean when that bill does pass. That legislation will devote over half a trillion dollars to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by over a billion metric tons by the end of the decade, at least 10 times more than any legislation previously passed by Congress. Along the way, it will reduce consumer energy costs. It will invest in a clean energy economy. It will create hundreds of thousands of jobs, and it will set the United States on course to meet its new climate targets, achieving a 50 to 52% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 2005 levels by 2030. The US is back, and in moving more boldly, the US is not alone.

Earlier this year, the UK government, our hosts, announced they plan to cut emissions by almost 80% by 2035. This summer, the European Union put themselves on a path to carbon neutrality by 2050. Korea passed a Carbon Neutrality Act in September that requires the government to cut greenhouse gas emissions 35% or more by 2030. The Canadian government has laid out a path to carbon neutrality by 2050 with milestones to hit along the way. Paris showed the world that progress is possible, created a framework, important work was done there, and important work has been done here. That is the good news.

Now for the bad news. We are nowhere near where we need to be yet. For starters, despite the progress that Paris represented, most countries have failed to meet the action plans that they set six years ago. The consequences of not moving fast enough are becoming more apparent all the time. Last month, a study found that 85% of the global population has experienced weather events that were more severe because of climate change, stronger storms, longer heat waves, more intense flooding, crippling droughts. Parts of the world are becoming more dangerous to live in, triggering new migration patterns and worsening conflict around the globe. It's one of the reasons why the US Pentagon and other agencies have said that climate change poses a national security threat for the US and for everyone else.

But not only did we not hit all of the targets that were pledged in Paris, but remember Paris was always supposed to be a beginning, not an endpoint of our joint effort to control climate change. Back in 2015, we knew that even if the commitments made as a part of the Paris Agreement were fully met, we would still fall short of our goal of keeping global temperature increases below 1.5 degrees Celsius. And that's why Paris was designed to be a framework for countries to constantly ratchet up their ambitions as they got more resources and as technology reduced the cost of transitioning to a clean energy economy.

So we come now here to Glasgow. And just as true with the Paris Agreement, there is good news and bad news about what has happened here this past week. The good news, in large part, because of the efforts of the people in this room, the hours of work that you spent with weak coffee and bad food, feeling sleepy. Because of you, countries around the world are recognizing this

is a decisive decade to avoid a climate disaster and are setting some really important goals for 2030.

More than a hundred countries this past week have committed to reduce methane emissions by 30% by 2030. As all of you know, curbing methane emissions is currently the single fastest and most effective way to limit warming. More than 100 countries have also promised to stop and reverse deforestation by the end of 2030. Businesses from around the world, name brands, some of the biggest businesses on this planet have agreed to help create a market for the technologies we need to transition to clean energy. Here in Glasgow, nations have also committed to help poorer countries move away from fossil fuels and deal with the effects of climate change.

President Biden announced that the US will be quadrupling its annual climate finance pledge over the next few years, to \$11 billion, including \$3 billion dedicated to helping vulnerable countries adapt to the impacts of climate change and the US along with 20 other countries agreed to stop publicly financing international fossil fuel development with limited exceptions.

So these are significant accomplishments. They are hard won commitments. You should be proud of yourselves, and we need to celebrate those commitments. Even as we demand that the signatories to these commitments actually follow through. We have to track it. They're not self-executing. They're going to require effort, but let's assume that we actually deliver. That's significant. But once again, we also have to acknowledge that this progress is partial. Most nations have failed to be as ambitious as they need to be. The escalation, the ratcheting up of ambition that we anticipated in Paris six years ago has not been uniformly realized. I have to confess. It was particularly discouraging to see the leaders of two of the world's largest emitters, China and Russia, declined to even attend the proceedings. And their national plans so far reflect what appears to be a dangerous lack of urgency, a willingness to maintain the status quo on the part of those governments. And that's a shame. We need advanced economies like the US and Europe leading on this issue, but you know the facts, we also need China and India leading on this issue. We need Russia leading on this issue just as we need Indonesia, South Africa, and Brazil leading on this issue. We can't afford anybody on the side-lines.

I recognize we're living in a moment when international cooperation has waned. A moment of greater geopolitical tension and stress in part because of the pandemic, in part because of the rise of nationalism and tribal impulses around the world. And yes, in part, because of a lack of leadership on America's part for four years on a host of multilateral issues. I understand that it's harder to get international cooperation when there are more global tensions, but there is one thing that should transcend our day-to-day politics and normal geopolitics. And that is climate change.

It's not just that we can't afford to go backward. We can't afford to stay where we are. The world has to step up and it has to step up now. So how is that going to happen? How do we close the gap between what's necessary for our survival and what seems politically possible right now? I confess I don't have all the answers, as I'm sure is true for all of you out there. Those of you who are steeped in this work, who are far more expert than me. There are times where I feel discouraged. There are times where the future seems somewhat bleak. There are times where I am doubtful that humanity can get its act together before it's too late and images of dystopia start creeping into my dreams. And yet whenever I feel such despondency, I remind myself that cynicism is the recourse of cowards. We can't afford hopelessness. Instead, we are going to have to muster the will and the passion and the activism of citizens, pushing governments, companies, and everyone else to meet this challenge. That's what allowed the US to do its part over the last few years to meet our climate goals. Even when we didn't have much leadership on it. It wasn't just elected officials or CEOs doing the right thing. It was ordinary Americans making their voices heard, making it clear we need to solve this problem, regardless of the obstacles. People who organized and educated others in their communities, people who put pressure on businesses and governments to do better. People who turn their passion into votes.

That's the kind of commitment we're going to need going forward, because let's face it. This is not just about raw numbers. This is not just about science. This is about politics. It's about culture. It's about morality. It's about the human dynamic. How do we work together to get a big thing done? And it's about participation and power. Thinking back on my own experience as president, I would've had the power to do even more to fight climate change during my time

in office if I'd had a stable congressional majority that was willing and eager to take action.

And for the bulk of my presidency, I didn't have that majority. Gaining such majorities require an engaged citizenry, willing to do what it takes to reward politicians who take this problem seriously and send out of office those who don't. I am convinced that President Biden's build back better bill will be historic and a huge plus for US action on climate change. But keep in mind, Joe Biden wanted to do even more. He's constrained by the absence of a robust majority that's needed to make that happen. Both of us have been constrained in large part by the fact that one of our two major parties has decided not only to sit on the side-lines, but express active hostility toward climate science and make climate change a partisan issue.

Perhaps some of you have a similar dynamic in your own countries. Although generally speaking, the United States seems to have a more vigorous opposition to climate than in many other places. But my broader point is that that's got to stop. Saving the planet isn't a partisan issue. I welcome any faction within the Republican party in the United States that takes climate change seriously. And that may be a rare breed right now, but keep in mind, such Republican elected officials used to be commonplace, used to exist. President George HW Bush, a Republican was one of the first US presidents to officially recognize the threat of climate change, was a signatory to the Rio Accord.

If we are going to act on the scale that's required, climate change can't be seen anywhere in the world as just an opportunity to score political points. And for those listening back home in the US, let me say this. It doesn't matter if you're a Republican or a Democrat. If your Florida house is flooded by rising seas or your crops fail in the Dakotas or your California house is burning down, nature, physics, science do not care about party affiliation. And what is true in the United States is true in every nation. We don't just need the Democrats or the Green Party or Progressives to be working together on this existential problem. We need everybody, even if we disagree on other things. And what's also true around the world, true in the US, true in all the countries represented here is that the most important energy in this movement is coming from young people. And the reason is simple. They have more stake in this fight than anybody else.

And that's why I want to spend the rest of my time today talking directly to young people who may be watching and wondering what they can do to help.

I am the father of two daughters in their early 20s, so I have some sense of all the stuff that gets thrown at young people these days. It's not always easy being young today. And for most of your lives, if you're in that generation, you've been bombarded with warnings about what the future will look like if you don't address climate change.

And meanwhile, you've grown up watching many of the adults who are in positions to do something about it either act like the problem doesn't exist or refuse to make the hard decisions necessary to address it. And that's a source of real anxiety and real anger at older people. And some of you, no doubt, wonder if you'll be able to be safe in the community where you've grown up, whether you'll have to raise your own kids in a world ravaged by extreme weather and climate migration and conflict. As one 16-year-old said, "For us, the destruction of the planet is personal." And that's why my message to young people begins with acknowledging you are right to be frustrated. Folks in my generation have not done enough to deal with a potentially cataclysmic problem that you now stand in here.

But I also want to share some advice my mother used to give me. If I was feeling anxious or angry or depressed or scared, she'd look at me and she'd say, "Don't sulk. Get busy. Get to work and change what needs to be changed." And luckily that's exactly what young people around the world are doing right now. Two years ago, a Swedish teenager named Greta Thunberg inspired millions of people to join the largest climate demonstrations in decades. A lot of people now know about Greta, but the world is full of Gretas. One of the things I love most about our work at the Obama Foundation is getting to meet young activists from all over the world taking up the baton on climate change. You just heard from Sheila Babauta, from the Northern Mariana Islands. As an elected representative, Sheila is fighting to preserve natural resources on the island and helping young people take the lead in the fight for human rights and climate action.

I've met people like Juan Carlos Monterrey-Gómez from Panama after representing his country at the Paris negotiations. I think he was like 22. Juan

then led an effort to amend the constitution of Panama. Today, he's here in Glasgow as a climate negotiator. We've got Colette Pichon Battle, who is the founder and executive director of the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy in Louisiana back in the states. They are non-profit helping communities of color across the South that are already feeling the effects of climate change rebuild after disasters and build more sustainable communities and more sustainable economies.

And then there's Louisa Neubauer, an activist who leads Fridays for Future strikes in Germany. During the global climate strikes in 2019, Louisa helped organize 270,000 marchers in Berlin, put pressure on German political parties to take climate change seriously. Climate change is frightening, she said. So the question is, how can we turn this anxiety into something constructive?

That's what these young leaders are already doing. I'm really looking forward to sitting down and talking with some of them in a separate form later today because they're not just working for their own countries. They are forming a movement across borders to make the older generation that got us into this mess see that we all have an obligation to dig ourselves out of it. And if those older folks won't listen, they need to get out of the way.

Now, at this point, some of the young people watching or listening, they may be thinking, "I don't have time to organize 200,000 people or propose a constitutional amendment. I've got a math exam next week." I get that. I promise you, unlike Greta, I was not on the cover of Time Magazine when I was 16 years old. And if I was skipping school, it had nothing to do with climate change. But there are plenty of things that each and every one of you young people can do that won't require devoting your entire life to the cause, but will make a real difference.

The first and most important is, if you are age eligible, to vote the issue. Vote like your life depends on it because it does. I recognize that a lot of young people may be cynical about politics, but the cold hard fact is we will not have more ambitious climate plans coming out of governments unless governments feel some pressure from voters. In one survey of young people in 22 countries, more people cited climate change as one of the most important issues facing the

world than anything else. Young people understand this issue, but they don't always vote at the same levels as older folks.

Many young people are now starting to realize I've got to make my interests heard if I have the opportunity to vote. So in the 2020 US presidential election, young people were more likely than older voters to say the climate change was their top concern and they also voted at a rate 11 points higher than in 2016. That's the kind of thing that makes politicians sit up and take notice. As one 20-year-old organizer said, young people understand that if we want to save our lives and our future, then we have to do it ourselves. And this is part of your power that you have to use. Don't think that you can ignore politics. You don't have to be happy about it, but you can't ignore it. You can't be too pure for it. It's part of the process that is going to deliver all of us.

A second way you can have an impact on climate change is by pressuring companies to do the right thing. Members of your generation have already shown you're willing to pay for products that you believe are responsible and responsive to the climate challenge, and that you're also willing to avoid those companies that are actually making climate change worse. I see this in my own daughters and their friends, their peer group, in terms of which companies they support and which products they buy. Not only are they sophisticated consumers, they're active and engaged citizens, and that's a message that CEOs will learn to understand. Companies are starting to figure out that becoming more energy efficient is good for their bottom line because they'll spend less on energy, but you also have the opportunity to teach them that by getting serious about climate change, they have a chance to win loyal customers and employees. And they conversely will lose customers and top flight employees if they're not on the right side of the issue. That's part of your power. You need to use it.

While you're at it, you need to help educate your parents and grandparents, your uncles and aunts, your teachers, your employers, because while a dangerously warming planet is a reality that a lot of you have grown up with as young people, you've studied it in school, you've read about, it's been part of the backdrop of your childhood, members of the older generation don't have that same frame of reference. They do love you, though. They do care about you. They listen to you more than you think. And if you explain how important

the issue is to you, you may lead them to rethink their position, or at least be more open-minded. In fact, I'm pretty sure they'll listen to you in a way they might never listen to a politician or some expert on TV or a former president. That's power you have. You have to use it.

And finally, let me say, it will not be enough to simply mobilize the converted. It will not be enough to preach to the choir. It will not be enough to just ramp up intensity among people who already know about climate change and already agree with us and care deeply about it. Protests are necessary to raise awareness. Hashtag campaigns can spread awareness. But to build the broad-based coalitions necessary for bold action, we have to persuade people who either currently don't agree with us or are indifferent to the issue. And to change the minds of those fellow citizens in our respective countries, we have to do a little more listening. We can't just yell at them or say they're ignorant. We can't just tweet at them. It's not enough to inconvenience them through blocking traffic in a protest. We actually have to listen to their objections and understand the reluctance of some ordinary people to see their countries move too fast on climate change. We have to understand their realities and work with them so that serious action on climate change doesn't adversely impact them.

So listen, it is true a lot of climate opposition comes from fossil fuel companies trying to make a buck, despite the green ads that they run on TV. It's true that there are climate deniers out there who, for ideological reasons, you will never convince. But I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about the fact that we've got to persuade the guy who has to drive to his factory job every single day, can't afford a Tesla, and might not be able to pay the rent or feed his family if gas prices go up. We have to think about the mother in India, who yes, will suffer droughts and floods made worse by climate change, but who's more immediate concern is getting electricity so her children don't have to sit in the dark every night and can't do their homework. That's not a... You can't dismiss that concern.

There are workers and communities that still depend on coal for power and jobs. And yes, they are concerned about maintaining their wages. That's not unreasonable for them to be concerned about that. And the fact is the truth is that transitioning from dirty energy to clean energy does have a cost. And it is not unreasonable for people who often are already economically vulnerable, and maybe don't feel particularly politically powerful. It's not unreasonable for

them to think that for all the high highfalutin' talk, some of those costs of transition will be borne by them. Not by the more powerful and the privilege. That's not an unreasonable perspective for them to have.

And that's why when it comes to climate change, a country like the US, with a higher per capita carbon footprint, does have to do more than a country like Bali or Bangladesh. It's also why we need to make sure the people most affected by the transition to clean energy, aren't the ones bearing most of the cost. They don't have any margin for error.

I can afford to give up a lot of my current lifestyle to benefit the planet because I'll still have a lot left over. A lot of folks don't have that cushion. So that means that any climate plan worth salt has to take these inequities into account. Whether it's through subsidies to poor people, to ease the transition to clean energy, whether it's technology transfers that help poor countries meet their development goals by leapfrogging dirty fuels, we have to pay attention to those embedded inequities and the politics that surrounds them. And that's not easy. So let me close by being blunt, keeping the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius will not be easy. It is going to be hard. Existing political institutions move slowly, even when leaders are well intentioned. International cooperation has always been difficult. It's made more difficult by all the misinformation and propaganda that can flood out through social media these days. Business leaders, let's face it, are typically rewarded for boosting short term profits, not addressing major social issues. Getting people to work together on a global scale takes time. And right now that's time we don't have.

So if we're honest with ourselves, yes, this is going to be really hard. The thing we have going for us is that humanity has done hard things before. I believe we can do hard things again. Yes, the process will be, be messy. I guarantee you; every victory will be incomplete. We will face more setbacks. Sometimes we will be forced to settle for imperfect compromises because even if they don't achieve everything we want, at least they advance the cause. At least they move the ball down the field.

But if we work hard enough for long enough, those partial victories add up. If we push hard enough, stay focused enough and are smart about it, those victories accelerate. And they build momentum. If we listen to those who are resistant

and we take their concerns seriously, and we work with them and we organize and we mobilize and we get our hands dirty in the difficulties of changing political dynamics in our countries, those victories start happening a little bit more frequently. If we stay with it, we will get this done.

So to all the young people out there, as well as those of you who consider yourselves young at heart, I want you to stay angry. I want you to stay frustrated, but channel that anger, harness that frustration, keep pushing harder and harder, for more and more because that's what's required to meet this challenge. Gird yourself for a marathon, not a sprint, for solving a problem this big, this complex and this important has never happened all at once. Since we're in the Emerald Isles here, let me quote the bard, William Shakespeare, "What wound," he writes, "did ever heal but by degrees."

Our planet has been wounded by our actions. Those wounds won't be healed today or tomorrow or the next, but they can be healed. By degrees. And if we start with that spirit, if each of us can fight through the occasional frustration and dread, if we pledge to do our part and then follow through on those commitments, I believe we can secure a better future. We have to. And what a profound and noble task to set for ourselves. I'm ready for the long haul if you are. So let's get to work. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.